THE MYSTERY
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Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

"Then Moses went up on the mountain,
and the cloud covered the mountain."
Exodus 24:15 (NRSV)

Great and good God,
give us pure hearts that we may see you,
humble hearts that we may hear you,
hearts of love that we may serve you,
hearts of faith that we may live in you,
reverent hearts that we may worship you,
here and in the world out there,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Dag Hammarskjöld
1905–1961

Dear God, we thank you for this time together. We live busy, hurried, noisy lives.
And so we are grateful for this time of silence and stillness.
Speak to us today; come to us in word and sacrament.
Startle us once again with your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes modernity and antiquity intersect in the most interesting ways.

I was sitting in Santa Fe last weekend in a meeting of the presidents of our ten Presbyterian theological seminaries and the presidents of their boards of trustees. I serve as president of the board of McCormick Theological Seminary here in Chicago. At the first session on Friday morning, the coordinator of theological education for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Lee Hinson-Hasty, was to lead the opening devotions. He began by saying that he was embarrassed because he forgot to bring a Bible, had searched his room for the Gideon Bible but someone must have stolen it, but he was sure that in such an august group of Presbyterians someone must have a Bible in his or her briefcase. We all poked around in our briefcases and, lo and behold, no one had a Bible. That alone produced a fair amount of

chuckling about the role of scripture in Presbyterian theological education. But then one of the presidents, Phil Butin, from San Francisco Seminary and clearly way ahead of most of us in his mastering of information technology, pulled out a Blackberry, asked what text Lee was looking for, Googled it, I assume, and a few moments later had it. Lee asked him to read, and Phil did, slowly, deliberately read, from the handheld miracle, this amazing symbol of modernity, venerable and ancient words, thousands of years old, the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20.

It was, I thought, quite a moment, a moment charged with an amazing encounter that happens in religion particularly, between modernity and antiquity.

Our texts this morning, for instance: Moses accepting an invitation to meet God on the mountaintop and when he arrives finds nothing but a cloud, and so sits and waits in silence for six days and then a voice speaks, but doesn't say much, just acknowledges Moses' presence: "Oh, I see you're still here."

And Jesus and Peter, James and John also on a mountaintop, and there's that cloud again; Jesus' face shines like the sun, and his clothes are dazzling white. Moses and Elijah show up, and Peter—don't you just love Peter—either so overwhelmed with the power of the moment or scared to death, starts chattering, trying, I think, to pull this whole strange experience back to a place he can understand. He says, "Let's build. Let's form a building committee and construct three dwellings here to mark the spot, memorialize the moment, maybe a retreat center here on the mountaintop." The cloud descends and the voice interrupts his chatter: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

What in the world do you make of these stories: hallucination, dream, ecstatic vision, literary hyperbole? Modernity and antiquity collide here dramatically.

For Jesus' three disciples, Peter, James, and John, their experience of what we know as the transfiguration was a day when they saw clearly who Jesus was, the day they knew deeply in a place in their hearts, deeper, more real, more authentic than anything they knew with their minds, that their friend Jesus was the very Son of God. It was a powerful, indescribably powerful experience for them, memorialized in art perhaps more authentically than attempts at rational explanations. In fact in the John Timothy Stone Chapel there is a triptych of the transfiguration. Donna Gray told us that during a retreat for our fourth and fifth graders she took the youngsters into Stone Chapel in the dark and had them shine a flashlight on the painting of Jesus with his white robe shining. She said the kids thought it was pretty cool, and I think that's a pretty good way to deal with it—flashlight in the dark.

I take comfort actually in what Jesus says when it is all over, whatever it was. There the three of them were, on the ground, flat on their faces, terrified. And Jesus touches each of them on the shoulder and says, “Get up and do not be afraid,” and as they are stumbling down the mountain, he adds, “Tell no one about the vision.” What that means, I assume, is that you can’t explain some things that happen to you and your heart knows are rich and true. When you try, it doesn’t come out right and you sound and feel a little foolish. Ever happen to you? Ever try to explain how deeply moved you were listening to Beethoven’s “Missa Solemnis” or how, almost in spite of your rational self, you find tears in your eyes when you sing the national anthem? Ever try to tell someone else what it feels like to see the sun rise or to love someone or to be loved? “Tell no one,” Jesus said. Some things you can’t describe and explain rationally. When Luke tells the same story he concludes, “They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen” (Luke 9:36).

There is a very critical issue here, and it is, how do we know what we know? It has a wonderful name: epistemology, the study of how human beings know, the nature and limits of knowledge. Epistemology is one of the words you learn in Divinity School and never use again, and they tell you not to use words like that in sermons because it sounds show-offy, and, as someone noted, your epistemology will not get you into heaven, but the topic is very important. How do you know what you know?

Since the Enlightenment we have been relying more and more on objective evidence, what we can see, taste, feel, observe, and analyze. Our epistemology, that is to say, rests on human reason, on common sense. And so when it comes to Bible stories like our texts this morning, we have trouble. But what if there is another way of knowing, not irrational but somehow different from, or above and beyond, human reason?

The texts lead in that direction. Moses himself expects to see God up on the mountain. It is so unique, so awesome, so dangerous to come into God’s presence that he leaves behind Joshua and the seventy elders he has brought along for support and walks the last leg of the journey alone. And when he reaches the summit he finds—nothing, a cloud, and so he sits down and waits in silence for six days.

Sometimes sitting in silence is the best we can do. Sometimes chattering doesn’t do much. Sometimes pressing for answers and explanations seems almost to trivialize the experience. When you sit at the bedside of a dear one, a friend, who is critically ill, it’s better to sit in silence than make small talk. When you are privileged to share with another the facing of the final mystery, it is better to sit in silence than to offer rational explanations of what is happening.

Sometimes it is better, as the Bible says, to “be still and know that I am God.”

Sometimes religion talks too much. Sometimes religion thinks it knows everything and forgets the mystery and the sitting in silence.

I occasionally watch Larry King, and I tuned in last week on the night he was interviewing a few of the leading evangelicals who are on the cover of *Time* magazine this week, among them Franklin Graham and Tim LaHaye, author of the Left Behind series of books, and his wife. Bishop T. D. Jakes, of Dallas, pastor and founder of Potter’s House, a huge megachurch with a very impressive outreach ministry, was modest, careful, respectful of the opinions and beliefs of others, was quieter. Graham and LaHaye took my breath away with how much they had to say on every subject King brought up, how utterly certain they were about the mind and will of God on a myriad of issues. There was no mystery. No acknowledgement that we may not always have access to God’s heart. There was no silence at all.

Sometimes religion itself needs the reminder that God is God and we are not, that the God we have come to know remains, finally, unknowable.

Author Annie Dillard was thinking like that when she wrote, apropos of our texts, “I have never understood why so many mystics of all creeds experience the presence of God on mountaintops. Aren’t they afraid of being blown away? It often feels best to lie low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightning rod.” The high churches—like us—Dillard says, where she belongs, “come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism—with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*).

Deep in our tradition, our Judeo-Christian tradition, is respect for the mystery and unknowingness of God.

In 65 BCE, after God’s people had suffered centuries of warfare, exile, and persecution, the Romans finally arrived. The Romans were curious about the religion, the monotheism, of the Jews, particularly the great temple with its Holy of Holies. The Romans had many temples, many gods. When Jerusalem itself fell, the Roman general Pompey entered the temple, found the Holy of Holies at the center, and, a little like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* ripped the curtain with his sword and entered the space on his horse. He expected to see a statue, an idol, an altar, a scroll—some object to represent the God of Israel. What he found was nothing, an empty space, the very essence of Judaism: mystery and transcendence of the one God.

At the heart of our faith is a respect, a modesty, a humility before the mystery and transcendence of God. Our relationship with God should perhaps begin not with our theological ideas, our talking and thinking, our reading and writing and singing and reciting creeds, but with the image of Moses, surrounded by the eerie mists of the cloud on the mountain, sitting in silence, waiting.

In communion, in the mystery of bread broken and the cup shared, the body and the blood of Christ, in the silent waiting of the Sacrament, there is a moment of intimacy, of transparency.

I'm reading a wonderful new novel by Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead.* It's about a minister, John Ames, in his late 70s, slowly dying of heart failure, writing a letter to his young son, whom he knows he will not live to see grow up. He wants to convey to his son something of who he was and what his life was about.

> Today was Lord's Supper, and I preached on Mark 14:22: "And as they were eating, he took bread and when he had blessed, he brake it and gave it to them and said, Take ye, this is my body." Normally I would not preach on the Words of Institution themselves when the Sacrament is the most beautiful illumination of them there could be. But I have been thinking a great deal about the body these last weeks. Blessed and broken . . . I want to talk about the gift of physical particularly and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it. I have been thinking how I have loved my physical life.
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> In any case, and you may remember this, when almost everyone had left and the elements were still on the table and the candles still burning, your mother brought you up the aisle to me and said, "You ought to give him some of that." You're too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands. They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood. (p. 70)

When I read that I thought about all the occasions over the years, all the faces and hands, and the way Communion, our communion with God, is so personal, so real, that it isn't helped by much talking. I thought about the mystery.

> The mystery that is God.
> The mystery of God's love for us
> The mystery of Jesus Christ, God's only Son.
> His life lived for us,
> The mystery of his death for us,

The joy of his resurrection promise,
The most wonderful mystery, body and blood.

Amen.